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TAGS: [PTER](#) [PREL](#) [PBTS](#) [MASS](#) [MOPS](#) [IS](#) [LE](#) [TU](#) [SY](#)  
SUBJECT: DEMARCHE ON SYRIAN TRANSFERS OF ARMS TO HIZBALLAH

REF: A. LAWSON-SISON E-MAIL DATED 2/25/2010  
[1](#)B. TEL AVIV 404  
[1](#)C. STATE 17307

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons  
1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (S) SUMMARY: In response to the Ambassador's February 25 demarche on the danger of Syrian transfers of increasingly sophisticated weaponry to Hizballah, Prime Minister Saad Hariri acknowledged the urgency and serious nature of the message and said he had feared that Hizballah had "new technology." He suggested that Turkey might play a helpful role in influencing the Syrians and assessed that Syria would only move closer to Iran in the event of a conflict. Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri dismissed the message as "Israeli propaganda" and called for a regional solution to the issue. Berri nonetheless accepted that the situation was "not good" and promised to "do what I can." UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon Michael Williams reported his concern over detrimental "political drift" inside Lebanon and complained that Syria was "playing its old game." Meanwhile, Israeli aircraft conducted overflights over extensive areas of Lebanon on February 24 and 25. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (S) As requested in Ref A, on February 25 the Ambassador delivered to Prime Minister Saad Hariri, Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri, and UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon (UNSCOL) Michael Williams demarche points on Syrian efforts to provide arms to Hizballah, including transfers of increasingly sophisticated weaponry. President Michel Sleiman is in Russia on an official visit through the evening of February 26; PM Hariri's diplomatic advisor undertook to pass the points to Sleiman's traveling party immediately.

HARIRI CALLS FOR REGIONAL SOLUTION  
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[1](#)3. (S) PM Hariri listened to the demarche attentively, then remarked that he had been concerned that Hizballah had "new technology." He asked the Ambassador whether the demarche was related to Iranian President Ahmadinejad's concurrent visit to Damascus. The Ambassador underscored that there was no connection between Ahmadinejad's visit and the timing of the demarche, noting that U/S Burns had conveyed U.S. concerns about cross-border weapons smuggling into Lebanon destined for Hizballah during his February 17 meeting in Damascus with Syrian President Bashar al-Asad. Hariri's diplomatic advisor Mohamad Chatah, who had been watching the televised joint press conference of Ahmadinejad and al-Asad, reported that while al-Asad and Ahmadinejad agreed on support for the "resistance" (i.e. Hizballah), al-Asad had taken a more moderate tone and commented positively on Turkey's role in the region during the press conference.

[1](#)4. (S) Hariri opined that the only way to avoid conflict in the region was to keep open the "two windows" of the Syrian and Palestinian peace tracks with Israel. Doing so, he said "would freeze Syrian thinking on weapons transfers," but

should both windows close simultaneously, Syria would stand by Iran in a war. If there were peace, he assessed, Syria would move toward Turkey. Hariri recommended that Secretary Clinton telephone Turkish FM Ahmet Davutoglu to seek his intervention with Syria on the issue of weapons smuggling. Chatah added that exchanges of bellicose rhetoric from all sides were a "boomeranging crescendo" that increased the danger of conflict. Chatah undertook to call President Sleiman's diplomatic advisor Naji Abi Assi, who accompanied Sleiman to Russia, to inform him of our message.

#### BERRI DISMISSES "ISRAELI PROPAGANDA"

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15. (S) For his part, Speaker Berri asked the Ambassador if the U.S. message was related to Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak's visit to Washington. He stated that the message was "not new." Israel received weapons from the U.S., and Hizballah received weapons from Iran, Berri declared flatly. "All this propaganda" reflected "Israeli concern about the Iranian nuclear issue," he believed. Berri then underscored his concern for his constituents in south Lebanon. The Ambassador replied that the message was a reflection of U.S. concern and not connected to any visits to Washington or in the region. She underscored that the full implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701, including the arms embargo and weapons-free zone, remained a top priority for the United States. She urged Berri to heed the message in the interest of regional peace and stability.

16. (S) Speaker Berri maintained that the only solution was a regional peace initiative along the lines of the Madrid peace conference. Israel was "not ready to give the Palestinians anything," he said, "and if Abbas got nothing, no one can." Without a strong initiative, the conflict would continue in a vicious circle as each side continued arming itself, Berri said. In the absence of a regional solution, "Lebanon can do nothing," he stated. The Ambassador reaffirmed President Obama's commitment to comprehensive Middle East peace, and she underscored firmly that destabilizing actions such as smuggling sophisticated weapons undermine peace efforts. Berri promised in response that he "would try to do something," without specifying what action he would take. "The situation is not good," he admitted.

#### WILLIAMS VOICES CONCERN OVER REGIONAL TRENDS

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17. (S) UNSCOL Williams reported that he was "generally disturbed" by trends in the region. While he had considered recent tensions to be nothing but a war of words until ten days before, on February 18 he had called on presidential advisor Abi Assi to ask him to pass to President Sleiman his growing concern about Iran and Hizballah's behavior in the run-up to an effort to impose new sanctions on Iran in the UN Security Council. One weakness of UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1701 was that it had no mechanism for monitoring the Lebanese-Syrian border, Williams complained. As a result, he said, he had "no clue" as to the volume of arms flowing across the border and found it difficult to criticize Syria and Hizballah in his official reports absent hard evidence. While he had always maintained that UNSCR 1701 guaranteed peace and stability in the region, Williams explained, he was becoming increasingly aware that "only one mistake" could destroy all gains to date.

18. (S) Williams reported that he was troubled by domestic "political drift in the wrong direction" as Hariri struggled with his new role as head of a national unity government containing Hizballah. While Williams said he understood Hariri's quandary, he rhetorically asked, "Why does he need to go out of his way?" Williams expressed concern about Hariri's political advisors and wondered aloud why Hariri didn't see the wisdom of confining his opposition to Israel to the context of UNSCR 1701.

19. (S) "We are at a real low point in the Palestinian track, and there is no prospect of progress on the Syrian track,"

said Williams, adding that such deadlock increased pressure in Lebanon. Iran was "upping the ante," Williams said, and he felt, based on recent discussions, that the French were complacent about Syrian misbehavior. "Syria is playing its old game," Williams assessed, and he described a "deliberate hardening" from Damascus on Lebanese issues. The example of Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, who was being forced into an "embarrassing" position to gain Syria's good graces, was indicative of this trend, Williams said. He also pointed to rumors that Syrian leaders were unhappy with a recent Hariri interview with the Italian paper Corriere della Sera because he underscored his role as prime minister of all Lebanese and his insistence on a state-to-state relationship with Syria instead of a personal relationship with al-Asad. Williams also decried Syrian inaction on the issue of border delineation with Lebanon.

#### ISRAELI OVERFLIGHTS

¶10. (S) The Lebanese Armed Forces G-2 intelligence bureau reported to Embassy Defense Attache that Israeli aircraft conducted "simulated raids" from the evening of February 24 through the morning of February 25 over the southern towns of Nabatieh, Iqlim al-Toufah, Marjayoun, al-Arkoub, and al-Kheyam, as well as parts of the central and western sectors of the Bekaa Valley. Later on the morning of February 25, Israeli "simulated raids" continued over Jezzine, Iqlim al-Toufah, al-Arkoub, Hasbaya, Rashaya, the West Bekaa and Mount Lebanon, the G-2 reported.

¶11. (S) COMMENT: Hariri clearly internalized the U.S. message. Speaker Berri, who feigned nonchalance during the discussion, made sure nonetheless that his advisors had written the talking points on their notepads. End comment.

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